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PRESIDENT GEORGE W. BUSH MAKES HISTORY AS COMMENCEMENT SPEAKER FOR U.S. MERCHANT MARINE ACADEMY'S CLASS OF 2006

President George W. Bush made history on June 19 when he stepped off the Marine One helicopter onto the campus of the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy. The president was aboard to deliver the keynote address to the 202 members of the Academy's Class of 2006, and he was the first sitting U.S. president to ever visit the Kings Point, Long Island campus.

When President Bush was announced and walked to the podium with the Academy's band performing "Hail to the Chief" in the background, the crowd of about 5,000 onlookers rose to their feet in applause.



Photos courtesy of U.S. Merchant Marine Academy

President Bush delivering the keynote address to the graduating class of 2006 at the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy.

"This is a proud moment for the Class of 2006," the president said. "You have worked hard for this day... On behalf of the American people, I congratulate you on a fine achievement, and I thank you for choosing to serve the United States of America."

Thirty-three members of the Academy's 2006 class were sworn into active military duty during commencement, with another 13 graduates expected to enter active duty in the months ahead. The rest of the class was commissioned as U.S. Naval Reserve ensigns.

Story by Martin Skrocki, Public Information Officer, USMMA

Among the dignitaries on the commencement stage with the president were U.S. Secretary of Transportation Norman Y. Mineta, U.S. Deputy Secretary of Transportation Maria Cino, Acting Deputy Maritime Administrator and Chief Counsel Julie Nelson, and three former Maritime Administrators: Warren Leback, Albert Herberger and William Schubert.

The President ended his 20-minute keynote address with an exhortation to the rows of Academy graduates arrayed in their choker white tunics. "I ask you to go forth with faith in America, and confidence in the eternal promise of liberty," he said.

As the last part of the Academy's 70th commencement ceremony, President Bush shook hands—and, in some cases, exchanged high fives and hugs—with all of the graduates as they walked across the stage to receive their diplomas and merchant marine licenses as deck or engineering officers.

The members of the class of 2006 represented 34 states and the U.S. Virgin Islands. The class also included six students from the Republic of Panama. Third mate licenses went to 116 graduates; another 86 earned third assistant engineer licenses. Twenty-eight women were part of this year's class, bringing the total number of academy female graduates to 552.

Many of the Academy's graduates were clearly in awe of having their commander-in-chief at graduation. "I knew it was going to be an impressive speech," said graduate Michael Metz of Hopewell, N.J. "But the President was also real personal with all of us."



President Bush waving with graduate Ross Coviello to the young man's family in the viewing stand.